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Can the green transition become more politically popular? A commentary on Ban, Genovese and Schwander / Durazzi, N.. - In: STATO E MERCATO. - ISSN 0392-9701. - (2026), pp. 107-111.

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15/08/2026 08:01

Can the green transition become more politically popular?

A commentary on Ban, Genovese and Schwander

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Cornel Ban (CB), Federica Genovese (FG) and Hanna Schwander (HS) provide a most thoughtful and highly original set of papers, which outline different facets of the green transition in Europe and globally. Differences in the analytical foci of their analyses – geopolitics in CB, environmental and industrial policy linkages in FG, public opinion in HS – share, however, a common denominator in the pessimism for the present and future of green policy and politics. But does the outlook for green policy and politics have to be so bleak? And is the nature of green policy and politics such that the green transition has to be a fundamentally ‘politically-defensive’ project?

The papers offer compelling reasons as to why this may well be the case. CB assesses the lost terrain of the European Union vis-à-vis China (and the US) on securing critical raw materials and outlines the reasons why the success of the catch-up process initiated by European institutions might not be easily accomplished. FG outlines the inherently unstable nature of the linkage between environmental and industrial policy, at times when such linkage should instead be deep and stable for a successful green transition to occur. HS further shifts gears in pessimism, outlining how the green transition creates a reservoir of political support for illiberal political projects and far-right parties.

Yet, the papers do more than warn against the dark side of the green transition. They also provide evidence that political support may be there too, although at present this may take more the form of seeds of political support, rather than ripe fruits. Some of the public opinion data reported by HS is a case in point here: public opinion is increasingly aware of and concerned about climate change and its consequences. And while such awareness is more acutely present among certain socio-demographic groups, e.g. younger and / or more educated individuals, it has been increasingly shared by large strata of the population. The ensuing question, therefore, is: (how) can organised actors, e.g. progressive parties or trade unions, capitalise politically on the potential sources of political support for incisive climate action? And to what extent popular

support for climate action, even if at present dispersed and partly latent, can become a credible counter-force to weaken the ability of far-right parties to mobilise green discontent?

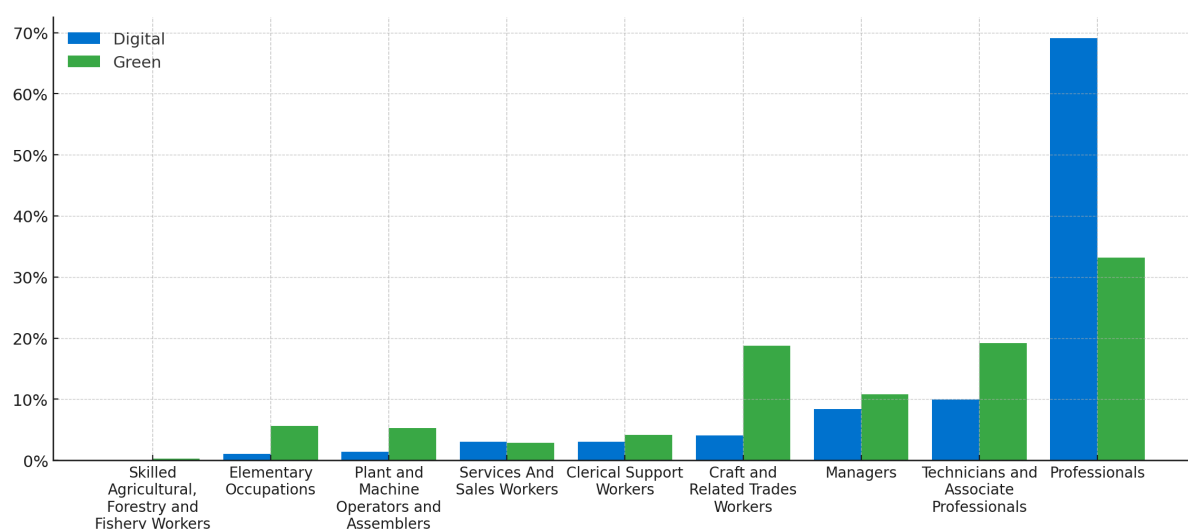
A potential answer may lie in policy design. Indeed, both FG's and CB's articles show that climate policies in Europe have been often ineffective and perhaps not daring enough, but that's not always been the case, and – by implication – that does not have to be the case in the future. FG, for instance, illustrates how a reasonably successful, deep linkage between 'climate governance and energy transition' was achieved, if short-lived, in Europe in the early 2000s. It is therefore at least a possibility to assume that policy-makers may be able to design climate policies that are more effective and incisive than those we currently have in Europe. But how can such effective green policy-making be 'shielded' politically from the 'threat' of greenlash? Broad popular support for climate action may certainly be a helpful factor, but it is unlikely to be 'enough' by itself, in that the political economy of climate change literature has by now time and again documented how the green transition is a textbook case of 'diffuse benefits' and 'concentrated losses', which tends to lead the latter to mobilise more strongly and more effectively than the former.

But, it has also been shown that policy-makers can work to concentrate benefits through policy design and target more explicitly those socio-economic groups and territories that are more directly affected by the negative economic consequences of the green transition, e.g. because they are more reliant on brown activities that need phasing out. The key challenge, therefore, is that of developing policies whose material benefits for the 'losers' of the green transition are both high and visible enough to weaken the anti-green transition sentiments that these socio-economic groups may end up cultivating otherwise. Work by Diane Bolet and colleagues (2024) shows that this is possible by devising policies that combine 'capacitating' and 'compensatory' elements (think re-training and early retirement respectively) and that involve organised groups (e.g. trade unions) for effective design, targeting and communication of policies.

More broadly, past socio-economic 'transitions' (think of de-industrialisation or technological change) offer some reason for optimism. Consider the decline of manufacturing and the rise of the service economy in Europe. As famously shown by Torben Iversen and Anne Wren (1998), this massive socio-economic shift – while posing reasonably similar challenges across countries – has been dealt with very differently across space. Where states have thrown their weight behind this transition by mobilising resources, for instance in the form of stimulating public sector

employment or mobilising robust social policies, de-industrialisation and the rise of the service economy was by and large a success story on both economic and social grounds.¹ I would push this line of argument even further. The green transition – compared to other contemporary transitions – may have some features that make it structurally less prone to inequality-enhancing dynamics, if the public policies to accompany it are designed properly. Compare the demand for labour that emerges from the digital transition and that emerging from the green transition (see figure 1). The former has a clear ‘skill’ bias – creating demand for highly skilled workers (with the ‘professionals’ category towering over the rest) and hollowing out the middle of the skill distribution. The green transition, instead, produces a much more heterogenous demand for labour, very much including technically-oriented mid-skill level jobs (such as ‘craft and related trades workers’).

Figure 1: Occupational distribution of employment in the digital and green transitions



Source: Carstensen, Durazzi, Emmenegger and Gingrich (2025, p. 2)

And these mid-level skilled jobs are precisely those held by those individuals – typically male, older, vocationally oriented - whose hollowing out and subsequent threat of status loss has been identified as a crucial reservoir of discontent fuelling illiberal political projects (Häusermann & Kitschelt, 2024). Hence, from this vantage point, the green transition may even have stronger in-built seeds of political support, compared to other transitions that display a clearer skill bias. It is therefore the task of public policy – e.g. by attuning skill formation and labour market policy to the emerging demand of the green transition – to activate these ‘latent’ sources of political

¹ I am inspired in this paragraph by a comment made by Matteo Jessoula at the annual Stato e Mercato seminar, although he should not be implicated in how this has been formulated here.

support by creating the conditions to unlock the potential material benefits of the green transition and use them to elicit political support. This is by all means no easy task. The socio-economic needs that stem from the green transition, for instance, are fast changing as they often depend on technological breakthroughs that are not always linear or predictable (Schmidt and Sewerin 2017). But if governments are up to their task – which is that of creating institutions that ‘are flexible enough to adapt to shifting technological and ecological demands while stable enough to sustain political coalitions and social inclusion’ (Carstensen, Emmenegger, Durazzi and Gingrich 2025, p. 1) – there may be here may be an opening for a space of ‘positive’ political possibilities around the green transition.

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